

## Semitic Languages (with Special Reference to the Levant)

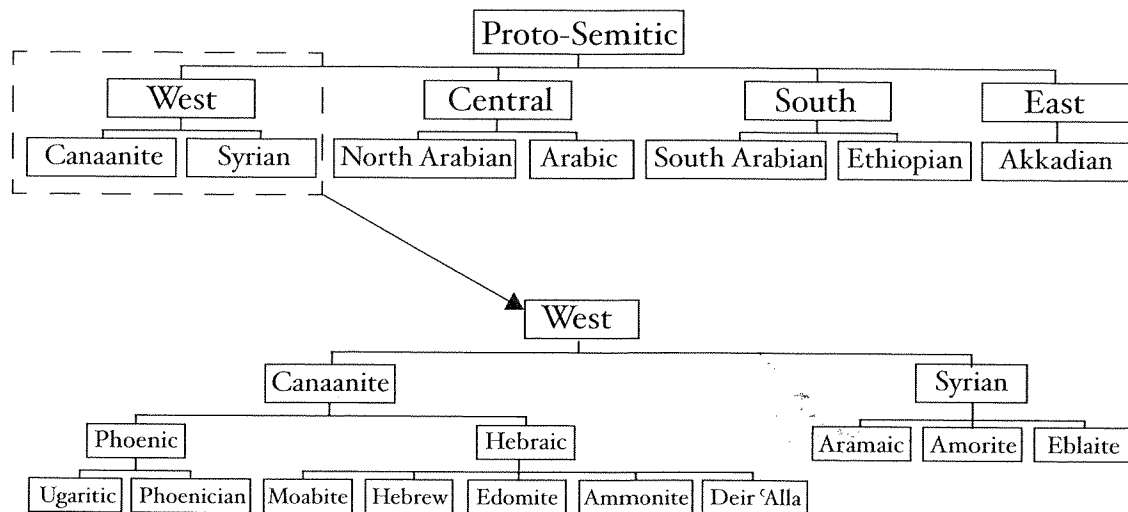
The languages attested in the ancient Levant are primarily Semitic languages. Semitic refers to a large language family comprised of the following main members: Akkadian, Eblaite, Amorite, Ugaritic, Canaanite, Aramaic, North Arabian, Arabic, South Arabian, and Ethiopian. The exact manner in which these languages are classified into various branches and groups is debated among Semitists. For example, is Eblaite a dialect of (Old) Akkadian, or is it an independent branch? Similarly, is Ugaritic an early form of (North) Canaanite, or is it an independent branch? Furthermore, are the earlier attested North Arabian and the later attested Arabic essentially the same language not to be subdivided, or do they represent two distinct languages? These and other questions cannot be answered to our full satisfaction, often due to insufficient evidence. In the accompanying chart we attempt a classification of the Semitic languages but readily admit to its provisional nature.

Regarding the above sample questions, note that we consider Eblaite to be an independent West Semitic language (not a dialect of Old Akkadian or East Semitic); that we subsume Ugaritic under the Phoenic subgroup of Canaanite (that is, it is not an independent language); and that we demarcate North Arabian and Arabic as distinct languages (albeit closely related).

According to this system, the languages of Syria and Canaan belong to the West Semitic branch. This large group may be subdivided into two smaller branches, a Syrian group and a Canaanite group.

The Syrian group includes Eblaite, Amorite, and Aramaic. The exact relationship among these languages cannot be worked out, because (a) the first two are so poorly attested; and (b) the three are attested in different eras. Eblaite is attested primarily in the third millennium B.C.E. and, while we possess thousands of texts and fragments, these documents are written with an exceedingly large percentage of Sumerograms. Accordingly, we often lack important lexical and grammatical data. Amorite is even more poorly known. The identification of the language is posited only through personal names appearing in Akkadian texts of the late third and early second millennia B.C.E. These Amorite personal names reflect West Semitic usage and not East Semitic usage, so scholars have created the Amorite category for them. Aramaic is attested much later, in the first millennium B.C.E. and the first millennium C.E. (and is still spoken today by people in pockets of Syria, Turkey, Iraq, and Iran). But because all three languages were used in ancient Syria and all three share some important features, it is appropriate to speak of them as a Syrian group of the West Semitic branch.

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The Canaanite group is subdivided into a Phoenic subgroup and a Hebraic subgroup. The evidence suggests that the individual members of these two subgroups were mutually intelligible, and thus it is proper to speak of them as dialects of Canaanite.

The Phoenic subgroup includes Ugaritic, attested in the late second millennium B.C.E. at Ugarit and Ras ibn Hani; and Phoenician, attested in the first millennium B.C.E. and the first five centuries C.E. in the Phoenician homeland (Byblos, Tyre, Sidon, and others) and throughout the Mediterranean wherever Phoenicians colonized. The specific variety of Phoenician used in late antiquity in the western Mediterranean (for example, Carthage) is known as Punic.

The Hebraic subgroup is so called because one of its component members, Hebrew, provides us with about 95% of the documentation (most of this from the Hebrew Bible). The other members of this subgroup are Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, and Deir 'Alla (the latter referring to the inscriptions found at Tell Deir 'Alla in Transjordan). With the exception of a few biblical pericopes that may date to before about 1000 B.C.E., the dialects of the Hebraic subgroup are attested in the first millennium B.C.E.

In the Akkadian letters found at Tell el-Amarna, from the 14th century B.C.E., various Canaanite forms and lexemes appear. These are further evidence for the Canaanite language.

The other main branches of Semitic are attested in the general region of the Levant as well. (a) Most importantly, Akkadian spread to the West Semitic world when it became the lingua franca of the ancient Near East in the second millennium B.C.E. Scribes in Syria and Canaan were adept at reading and writing (speaking too?) Akkadian in this period (witness the Akkadian texts from Ugarit, the Amarna letters, and so on). (b) North Arabian was the native language of the

denizens of the Syrian Desert in antiquity. The dialect used in the area closest to the arable regions of the Levant was Safaitic, attested from the 1st century B.C.E. to the 4th century C.E. One inscription found at Hamath, dated to approximately 800 B.C.E., appears to be written in Thamudic, another of the North Arabian dialects. (c) A few small inscriptions in Old South Arabian have been found at various sites in Israel (including Jerusalem); these reflect trade with South Arabia, though not necessarily competence in South Arabian by speakers of Canaanite.

Finally, it should be noted that non-Semitic languages also are attested in the Levant. (a) Scribes at Ebla clearly knew the Sumerian academic tradition well. (b) Texts in Hittite, Luwian, and Hurrian were found at sites along the northern fringes of the region bordering on Anatolia (for example, Ugarit, Carchemish, and Hamath). (c) Texts in Egyptian were found at various sites in Canaan—for example, Beth-shan—but most likely they are the products of Egyptian scribes serving in the Egyptian administration of the land during the Empire period of the New Kingdom and were not produced by native West Semitic speakers. On the other hand, if the Tale of Sinuhe (20th century B.C.E.) can be trusted, the Egyptian language could be heard in the Levant.

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